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ABSTRACT

The policy statement of the American Foundation for the Blind deals with specialized and general agencies serving blind and otherwise visually impaired persons. Noted is a recent trend toward amalgamating programs for various handicapped groups under single "umbrella" type agencies in the interest of economy, efficiency, and psychological benefits to clients. It is stated that agencies for the blind serve a unique professional function offering personal adjustment services, mobility and orientation training, and vocational counseling; that services for blind people should be combined within a single multiservice agency for the blind; that no evidence exists to support the value of providing specialized services for the blind within generalized settings; and that public and private agencies need to engage in joint planning and interactions so that duplication of services or inadequate services do not occur. (DB)

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Policy Statement

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BACKGROUND

Social institutions in the United States historically have come into being in response to the special needs of people. Aside from the well-known examples of protective services for orphans and widows, one finds other examples relating to a wide range of individuals suffering from handicapping conditions. One of the earliest responses of our society was to blind persons. While the first efforts to provide special programs for the blind were in the field of education, the recognition of other needs led to the establishment of literally hundreds of specialized facilities, both governmental and private, to serve this group of disabled citizens.

In recent years, a trend has developed which appears to threaten the valuable gains that have accrued from years of experience in developing techniques and service programs designed to meet the unique needs of blind and visually impaired persons. This trend has taken the form of amalgamating programs for various handicapped groups under the auspices of a single, large agency, particularly in state and federal agencies. The same trend is apparent for other government services and the use of "umbrella" type agencies to house services-to-people programs is becoming more and more common. Something analogous to this appears to be happening in some generic voluntary agencies, where there is a tendency to attempt to include services for blind persons. While it is claimed that such integration of services provides psychological advantages to the client served, other supporting reasons are that this leads to economy and efficiency. However, there is little objective evidence available to demonstrate that either is so. On the contrary, in large agencies blind people are likely to be lost sight of and their program needs given low priorities. Nevertheless, pressures have been exerted on state and local agencies for the blind to merge with larger units whether these be welfare, those serving other handicapped groups, or whatever else. This has been true of the large multifunctional agency as well as the smaller single purpose one.

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Paradoxically, there exists also an opposite trend at the state level, since some states are developing separate commissions for the blind. This is especially likely to occur in states where services to the blind are fragmented and portions of such services are dispersed among several major agencies or where there are serious service lacks.

POLICY

The American Foundation for the Blind recognizes the importance of economy and effectiveness in agency operations. It recognizes that interagency relationships, whether public or voluntary, are complex and that different systems for delivery of services to people are vital and necessary to the American community in order to meet its many variations and settings.

Systems designed to serve blind persons currently consist of:

1. Specialized agencies that deliver a single or limited number of special services to blind people.

2. Specialized agencies whose sole purpose and expertise is to deliver multiple special services to the blind and visually handicapped of all ages and all service categories.

3. Consolidated rehabilitation agencies where the "umbrella" motivation is the grouping of a number of agencies dealing with various handicapping conditions.

4. Consolidated agencies where the "umbrella" motivation is to group various human service programs and institutions.

The American Foundation for the Blind believes that specialized services to blind people are a unique professional function of agencies for the blind. These include, among others, services for personal adjustment; mobility; orientation; vocational counseling; training and placement; education including preschool training; and an array of services for adults through home teaching and related facilities.

The Foundation believes strongly in the principle that it is important to combine services for blind people within a single multiservice agency for blind people rather than to disperse them among several agencies. There is no reason

why one of the most serious of handicaps--blindness--should not provide that special concern and integration of effort which is needed to serve the whole individual. To date, no evidence has been produced to support reasons for the efficacy of providing specialized services to blind and otherwise visually impaired persons in general settings. In the one notable exception in the United States, namely, the field of education, satisfactory results have ensued only through the provision of basic safeguards such as specialized staff, resources, textbooks, and equipment. Where such supplemental aids are absent, the special education program fails. The Foundation, therefore, strongly endorses the development of specialized state agencies for the blind that combine all state service programs for blind people. In a similar manner, all voluntary agencies with special expertise in the field of blindness should cooperate in the delivery of services. They should be encouraged to develop means whereby all unnecessary duplication is eliminated, and to assist in the development of mutual cooperation with public agencies serving the blind at state and federal levels.

The Foundation believes, further, that the specialized agency for the blind cannot be the sole agency serving blind people. The specialized agency must interact with the community and what is available in the community. Where adequate general services are available these should be used by blind persons and should not be duplicated by the specialized agency. Some of the areas where community agencies are quite adequate are health services; higher education; and at times, in the field of family and social counseling, and the like. The specialized agency for the blind should be available for consultation to the aforementioned group.

Furthermore, private agencies serving the blind have a unique contribution to make and where these exist in a given state and are delivering a quality service they should complement and not duplicate the services of the state agency for the blind; nor, on the other hand, should the state agency for the blind reach out to assume services which are adequately provided by private agencies. This cooperative effort should not be left to chance but places upon the public and the private agency an important responsibility for joint planning and interaction.

Fundamentally, then, the Foundation supports the existence and need for multi-service agencies for the blind, both public and private, interacting with each other and with community agencies to the fullest possible degree. Where specific service programs for blind people are inadequate in a given locality, the specialized state agency for the blind has the residual responsibility to encourage or assume a leadership in their development.

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